

Negotiating and contesting ‘success’: discourses of aspiration in a UK secondary school

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The need to ‘raise aspirations’ among young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds has been prominent in UK policy debates over the last decade. This paper examines how this discourse is negotiated and contested by teachers and pupils in a Scottish secondary school. Interviews, group discussions and observations were analysed by drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis. The analysis exposes contradictions and silences inherent in dominant discourses of aspiration, most notably the tension between the promise and the impossibility of ‘success’ for all. It is argued that attempts to reconcile this tension by calling on young people to maximise individual ‘potential’ through attitude change silence the social construction of ‘success’ and ‘failure’. The paper concludes with suggesting ways in which schools could embrace the contradictions underpinning dominant ‘raising aspiration’ discourses and adopt a more critical-sociological approach in working with young people.

Keywords: aspirations; success; young people; discourse; education policy; Foucault

Introduction

Over the last decade, the need to raise young people’s aspirations has become an increasingly discussed topic in policy debates in the United Kingdom (Allen, 2014; Burke, 2012; Stahl, 2014). Policy documents, speeches and government funded-research reports have asserted a ‘lack’ or ‘poverty’ of aspiration, in particular among young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 2009; Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). Both in England and in other countries of the UK, a number of projects and initiatives aimed at ‘raising aspirations’ among young people were initiated under the Labour government during the 2000s.

Under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, most of the projects in England have been discontinued or are now funded under different mechanisms,¹ suggesting a move away from the partnership-based approach to raising aspirations and further devolvement of government responsibility. At the same time, the rhetoric of ‘aspiration’ prevails in the context of the government’s ‘social mobility’ strategy, as Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg asserted:

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Fairness means that no one is held back by the circumstances of their birth. Fairness demands that what counts is not the school you went to or the jobs your parents did, but your ability and your ambition. (Clegg, 2010)

While there is a vague promise here to remove the obstacles to social mobility, the main onus appears to be on the individual who is expected to show ambition, i.e. aspiration. It can thus be argued that under the Coalition government, neo-liberal trends of shifting responsibility for a 'good life' to the individual have intensified. It appears that the pressure on individuals to demonstrate aspiration or be damned is greater than ever.

Discourses of aspiration can be situated within wider neo-liberal policy trends of holding individuals responsible for their life outcomes (Du Gay, Salaman, & Rees, 1996; Rose, 1999). Raco (2009) identifies a shift from an 'expectational' to an 'aspirational' politics with an aim to create self-reliant, entrepreneurial citizens (see also Sellar, 2013). In this new type of politics, individuals need to actively pursue labour market participation in order to be deserving of state support (Carabine, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Cumbers, Helms, & Keenan, 2009), resulting in a particular pressure on individuals in socio-economically precarious circumstances. As Sellar (2013) has pointed out, the characteristics of neo-liberal citizen-subjects cannot be presupposed but have to be instilled. In this vein, 'raising aspiration' is a form of governmentality targeting the 'souls' of young people in order to create pro-active citizens of the future (Spohrer, 2011).

In the wake of this debate, a number of research projects have examined young people's hopes, plans and dreams for the future and have rejected the claim that young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds lack aspiration (see Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendick, 2010; St Clair, Kintrea, & Houston, 2013; Watts & Bridges, 2006). Challenging the blunt image of a 'lack of aspiration', these authors have highlighted the variety of aspirations pursued by these young people which, however, might not always converge with what is deemed 'high aspiration' in public discourse. Several authors have argued that working-class young people can experience conflicts between their classed, gendered and ethnicised identities and dominant notions of success, prioritising lifestyles and values that diverge from those promoted in official discourses (Archer et al., 2010; Brown, 2011; Watts & Bridges, 2006).

While these studies have pointed towards a disjuncture between official ascriptions of 'low aspiration' and young people's future imaginaries, there is little research which has examined how official discourse enters local practices and subjectivities (Raco, 2009). This article aims to trace how the demand on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to 'aim higher' is mediated and negotiated in everyday contexts.

Analysing empirical data collected in a secondary school in Scotland between 2010 and 2012, the article examines how messages about aspiration were conveyed through various practices in the school and interpreted by the pupils. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work, discourses are seen as powerful constructions of 'truth' that offer individuals subject positions from which they can speak, while, at the same time, providing spaces for resistance and reinterpretation (Foucault, 1979). Identifying how young people adopt, appropriate and resist official discourse allows insights into how power works upon, is worked with, and works through young people. The next section outlines Foucault's notions of discourse, power and subjectivity in more detail and discusses how discourse can be conceptualised at an everyday level.

Conceptualising discourse in everyday context

Thinking with Foucault, discourses can be understood as constitutive of the social, as they ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 54). Although there might be an extra-discursive ‘reality’, it is through discourse that we gain access to and understand the world around us (Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Parker, 1990). It is this constitutive character through which discourses exert power: they render certain modes of thinking legitimate while others are marginalised and submerged (Mills, 2003). The constitutive power of discourse extends to the individual: discourses offer individuals subject positions or locations from which they can understand themselves and from which they can speak and act (Hall, 1996; Henriques, 1998).

Applying Foucault’s notion of discourse, Stephen Ball (1994) has argued that understanding education policy as discourse entails looking for ‘the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of “truth” and “knowledge”’ (p. 21). It is thus assumed here that the discourse of aspiration provides schools and young people with ‘knowledge’ about what it means to be aspirational (and non-aspirational) and with subject positions about how to become and experience oneself as an aspirational (or non-aspirational) person. As policy discourse is itself an assemblage of discursive elements, it is characterised by tensions and contradictions. Analysing discourse for the ways in which meaning is created as well as for contradictions and silences (Tonkiss, 2004), allows us to gain insight into the workings of power in and through policy.

In this paper, constructions and contradictions inherent in official discourse – as mediated by the school – will be identified and juxtaposed with the young people’s ways of making meaning. While official discourses tend to ‘submerge’ local knowledges (Foucault & Gordon, 1980), discourse also always provides opportunities for resistance; it ‘can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 101). Although Foucault emphasised the possibility of counter-discourse and resistance in his later works,² he has been criticised for his tendency to view discourse as having a top down effect on individuals and local contexts (Bowe, Gewirtz, & Ball, 1994; Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010; Nixon, Walker, & Baron, 2002) and for not spelling out under what circumstances resistance is possible (McNay, 1994).

McKee (2009) has argued that there is a need for more work in order to conceptualise discourse ‘in situ’; that is, how discourse shapes subjectivities and knowledge in local contexts. In this paper, it is assumed that individuals are not simply ‘captured by the discourse’ (Trowler, 2001), but have the capacity to mobilise, negotiate, contest the logics and demands underpinning public debates of ‘aspiration’. In this paper, these discursive practices are examined with a view to exposing contradictions inherent in the aspirations discourse and identifying possibilities for thinking and acting ‘otherwise’ (Foucault, 1985).

Methodology

This paper draws on data that was collected in the context of a research project which analysed the public discourse of aspiration and its negotiation in a school context. The project combined an analysis of policy documents with an in-depth study in a

secondary school in a large Scottish city. The school's catchment area includes some of the most deprived areas in Scotland according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government, 2012). The level of area deprivation was reflected in the number of pupils receiving free school meals, which was about 40% in 2010/2011 compared to the Scottish national average of 15.2%. The ethnic background of the population in the area is predominantly white Scottish.

The fieldwork in the school was undertaken between 2010 and 2012 and comprised observations, documentary analysis, interviews with teachers and pupils and group discussions with pupils. Overall, five teachers were interviewed individually and 36 young people aged 14 to 17 participated in group discussions and individual interviews. The interviews and group discussions were transcribed and fieldnotes taken during observations. The data gathered was then analysed drawing on frameworks of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Willig, 2008). A first step involved the identification of how policy documents and teachers discursively constructed 'aspiration'. Secondly, observation fieldnotes and documents were analysed for the messages on aspiration conveyed to the pupils in the school. Finally, the analysis of the material gained from group discussions and interviews identified ways in which young people interpreted and negotiated messages they encountered in the school and the ways in which they constructed their future selves.

This paper presents data generated through observations, group discussions and interviews with teachers and pupils. The next two sections show how the school conveyed ideas on aspiration by promoting particular versions of success and meritocracy. This is followed by two sections which outline the ways in which pupils negotiated and contested the discursive demands inherent in aspiration messages conveyed in the school.

Promoting 'success'

The following two sections show how the call for young people to 'aim high' was mediated in the study school, highlighting the construction of 'aspiration' as well as the underlying assumptions, contradictions and silences (Tonkiss, 2004). Comparisons with the depiction of 'aspiration' in policy documents are drawn, assuming that education policies are not adopted in a straightforward fashion, but enacted in context-specific ways (Braun et al., 2010).

In the school, messages about 'aspiration' were conveyed to the pupils in the form of a discourse of 'success', which surfaced in two versions: in a more conspicuous version, success was equated with high academic attainment, participation in higher education and professional occupations, while in a more subdued version, 'success' was linked to realising individual talent through 'good' employment. The two versions have to be seen in a context of policy demands to boost the number of school leavers who go on to higher education as well as securing 'positive destinations' for the remainder of pupils – pressures which are particularly heightened in schools in disadvantaged areas.

In the study school, the teachers recognised and problematised the inherent hierarchies of value between different 'destinations', but nevertheless reproduced them in a number of ways. One teacher conceded: 'not that university is the only way of assessing how aspirational the school is' – a statement which indicates a contestation, but, at the same time, confirms that university is the 'gold standard'.

This hierarchy of desirability was also conveyed to the pupils in various discursive practices in the school, most prominently through celebrating and rewarding academic achievement. Those pupils who performed adequate 'success', for example, were identified, and selected for activities such as a 'conference day', which was presented as a reward. Repeatedly, these pupils would be referred to by teachers by using terms like the 'crème de la crème', 'stars' and similar.

In addition to making the 'success' of current pupils visible, former pupils who had gone on to study at university, in particular subjects such as medicine, dentistry and law, were regularly presented as role models in teacher-pupil interactions, events, and displays. This version of 'success' resonates with dominant policy discourses of social mobility which privilege traditional (upper) middle-class professions and educational trajectories and thus implicitly devalue working class lives (Reay, 2013; Watts & Bridges, 2006).

A further example was a board near the school entrance which celebrated former pupils who had pursued higher education degree by associating these 'destinations' with an air of fame and glamour. However, while the board represented the idea of (prestigious) higher education as the pinnacle of 'success', it also recognised achievements in the area of music, arts or sport. This idea was also conveyed in a unit on 'successful people' taught in a study skills class. Here, figures who had reached public attention, including scientists, entrepreneurs and sports people were presented as role models. However, it was emphasised that fame itself was not a legitimate aspiration; what counted was 'making a difference' to society.³

By promoting the idea of a contributing citizen, these messages suggest that the school's presentation of 'success' went beyond purely competitive notions which tend to dominate in policy discourse. At the same time, 'success' was defined as an individual achievement based on individual talent and realised through a (publically recognised and rewarded) occupation, while aspirations encompassing activities outside the realm of the labour market or taking a collective form were implicitly excluded.

The presentation of desirable 'destinations', by associating them with an air of fame and glamour, appeared to have the aim of appealing to the 'emotions' of young people, as Brown (2011) reports in relation to Widening Participation events. However, the statements seemed to convey mixed messages: while 'successful' destinations were presented as 'achievable', they were also depicted as 'special'. This glamorisation of destination is not only underpinned by a tension between specialness and ordinariness, but also points to the dilemma that the very idea of 'success' necessarily requires 'failure' (Bradford & Hey, 2007).

The teachers seemed to resolve this tension by drawing on the idea of variation in academic ability, typically referred to as 'potential'. Drawing on the notion of 'potential' seemed to be a strategy to reconcile the contradictory practices of encouraging 'high aspirations' and the reality of being able to guarantee limited success for all. As Burke (2012) has remarked, drawing on the work of Gillborn and Youdell (2000), the use of the seemingly neutral concept of 'potential' naturalises the allocation of people to occupational and social positions of different 'value' and obscures the classed, gendered and racialised construction of 'ability'.

In relation to efforts of 'raising aspiration', the notion of 'potential' appears to allow for conceptualising intelligence and talent as innate, but not fixed. Consequently, it could be mobilised by teachers to call upon the pupils to 'aim higher' by tapping their inner abilities to the fullest. The demand on young people to 'fulfil their potential whatever that happens to be' and 'aspire for the best they can do',

expressed by teachers in this study, resonates with the call on individuals to invest in their human capital, often employed in policy discourses around aspiration (Sellar, 2013). However, while policy discourses tend to emphasise the necessity to tap young people's potential in order to increase the nation's economic prosperity, the teachers emphasised the pupils' personal benefits.

The meritocratic promise

The tension between conveying the importance of individual 'choice', and promoting certain choices as better than others, could be observed in a number of school practices. The importance of making choices was conveyed to pupils through slogans on posters in the school's corridors, such as 'You are who you choose to be' or 'The choices we don't make are as important as the ones we do make'. The messages seem to call on young people to actively envisage and plan their futures. They seemed to be underpinned by stereotypical ascriptions of a 'fatalistic' culture in disadvantaged families and communities, commonly implied in policy documents and espoused by the teachers in interviews. Teachers in particular referred to a lack of role models in the pupils' life worlds:

You, know, a lot of the pupils, maybe, you know their parents might never have worked before. They don't know what it's like to get up at 7 o'clock in the morning and work right through to 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock at night, they've never, they've never had a sort of role model.

So, you've got a tradition of 30% [of unemployment] of the population in this area and then it's very hard to pick yourself up and decide that you're going go and do all these things and go above that.

The statements evoke the idea of an intergenerational transmission of poverty via a transfer of 'deficient' attitudes in disadvantaged communities, such as optimism and motivation, which is evident in many policy documents (Brown, 2013). Although the teachers recognised financial barriers to academic 'success', they emphasised the cultural and attitudinal barriers and saw it as a role of the school to instill the 'right' dispositions in young people.

The need to adopt the 'right' attitudes in order to realise innate talents and achieve 'success' was conveyed to pupils on a regular basis, for example through slogans on posters, such as:

Winners are too determined to be defeated.

If you want to change the world, start by changing your attitudes.

Many of life's failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up.

Furthermore, pupils were regularly asked to identify and name dispositions that would lead to academic and later life 'success', such as 'resilience'. A way of illustrating the importance of these dispositions was the discussion of 'successful' people's life stories, such as that of Ben Carson, a US-American brain surgeon who came from a 'broken home'. In this story, Ben Carson's success was presented as resulting from talent, realised through persistence and hard work. Given Ben Carson's upbringing, however, this also required the decision to change, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Ben suffered from a really bad temper and at the age of 14 he tried to stab another boy with a camping knife. He realised after that he had three choices: jail, residential school, or the grave. He didn't like any of those choices and decided that he was going to try harder at school. He did try harder and started getting good grades. This then led to a scholarship at Harvard University. (Excerpt from hand-out in Study Skills class)

The idea of 'success' as resulting from individual choice was also inherent in the following statement, which a teacher made during an address to pupils at a study skills 'conference':

The key to success is hard work. People like Andrew Murray didn't become great tennis players overnight but trained hard, 10 hours a day. One former pupil, currently in second year law at [university name] decided some time along the way that he wanted to do law. He had been a riot in S2.⁴ He is not brighter than anyone else here. It's about choice. Time to get smart.

By portraying success as the outcome of an individual decision to reach a 'goal' the teacher evoked a meritocratic logic which suggests that people's social positions are a reflection of their abilities and effort. The way in which success is described by the teacher in this statement appears to be underpinned by a notion that while the pupils possess innate ability (or, at least, 'potential'), this ability remains untapped due to a lack of 'aspirational' dispositions.

What seems striking is the emphasis on the decision to become 'successful', in particular through a change in attitudes and behaviours – evident in the idea that the 'model' pupil had turned from being 'riot' to a studious pupil and in Ben Carson's decision to 'turn his life around'. This suggests a demand on the pupils to transform themselves based on 'ideal' (white, middle-class) notions of educational 'success' (Archer, 2008). The 'ideal' pupil tends to be perceived as innately able, whereas the 'other' (minority-ethnic, working-class) pupil is considered to succeed through effort (Archer), although innate ability is recognised by reference to the idea of (unrealised) 'potential'. For the young people in the school this meant a demand to transform their inner selves in order to mobilise their 'human resources' towards individually suitable destinations of 'success'.

The pupils: negotiating and contesting 'success'

While some of the young people who participated in the study mobilised the dominant notion of 'success' conveyed in the school, they also recognised dominant societal hierarchies of value between destinations and occupations and contested the idea of what counts as success more or less explicitly.

When asked about their thoughts on different post-school destinations, the pupils generally reproduced the credentialist logic, according to which more educational credentials lead to more chances to gain 'good' employment. A university degree as well as professional occupations – promoted as the pinnacle of 'success' in the school – tended to be seen as desirable by most pupils who linked these destinations with rewards in the form of income and social recognition. This is illustrated in the following exchange between two pupils in a group discussion about public perceptions of a person with a university degree versus an apprenticeship:

Shawn:⁵ It's like when you say oh, I went to university, people seem to get a picture in their head, right.

- Robert: It's just people think you're really, really smart.
- Shawn: But if you say: I did an apprenticeship, they don't, it's not the same standard. Right enough, I don't think they look down on you, but they still. I think the way they look at you is a bit different.
- Robert: 'Oh, I've got, I've got a degree from [university name]', they just think you're a genius.

Robert's way of linking a university degree to extraordinary intelligence and social recognition seems to reflect the emotional appeal of the aspiration discourse (see also Brown, 2011). At the same time, the pupils' exchange appears to be infused with irony: By questioning the accuracy of the perception of 'genius', Robert at least implicitly questions conventional hierarchies of educational qualifications.

A more explicit contestation of conspicuous 'success' was evident in this exchange between a teacher and two pupils:

- Teacher: You should take studies more seriously, or do you want to work at McDonald's?
- One of the pupils: No [I want to do] a bit better than this [and work] at Tesco.

By using irony to answer the teacher's demand to study harder, the pupil seemed to question the hierarchy of occupations as well as the value of educational qualifications in the labour market. The latter indicates that the pupils had at least partial insight into the contradiction between the promise of 'success' for all and the economic reality of limited space in the upper ranks of the labour market (Brown, 2013). The rejection of 'McDonald's' jobs was a reoccurring theme in the pupils' discourse and points to the presence of a 'risk' to 'end up' in low-status employment given its prevalence in the local area (see also Archer et al., 2010).

A number of instances of more explicit contestation of dominant notions of 'success' surfaced in the young people's accounts. In a group discussion, these pupils expressed irritation about being positioned as (potentially) unsuccessful compared to their peers:

- Damien: Aye ... the teachers have taught them [the higher attaining pupils] and they've got Highers⁶ and all that and obviously they will think they've got a bright future ahead of them like, they can get an easy job, they can get a job that they want and like.
- Matthew: [This is what] they [the teachers] say to us, but I can get any job I want.
- Damien: But they [higher attaining pupils] obviously think they're going to have a bright future and get the job that they want ... But then, if you ask us, what we want to do when we are leaving, they [the teachers] don't know because, they don't know if we're going to be successful.

These pupils countered the deficit position they perceived to be attributed in the school by expressing confidence in finding employment on a par with or even surpassing their academically higher attaining peers. However, while they challenged the dominant notion of success which equates ability – and the resulting 'success' – with academic achievement, they did not reject the meritocratic logic outright. Matthew's statement that he could 'get any job' he wanted, points to on a 'fantasy' version of meritocracy mobilising the idea that individual effort and ability will lead

to success. This way, the pupils might shield themselves from the ‘realities’ of the current labour market in which the importance of educational credentials has increased. Overall, the pupils’ reaction could be read as a defence of their sense of self against deficit ascriptions in the school, as well as against a – more or less tacit – sense of the difficulties which they might encounter when looking for work.

Other pupils resisted the demand to ‘aim higher’ by presenting a personally chosen ‘goal’, usually in the form of an occupation, as preferable over the destinations deemed to be desirable by the school. Kara, who aimed to be a hairdresser, was aware of the low social recognition associated with this occupation but defended her decision by emphasising enjoyment and personal choice:

Kara: If you enjoy your job, then they, nobody can really, like, say: ‘oh, that’s rubbish’ or whatever, ‘cause that’s not for them to say if you’re enjoying it.

Interviewer: You think that they think that your plan wouldn’t be a good one?

Kara: Prob –, some people think hairdressing isn’t very –, but at the end of the day I’ve got to do what I want to do.

She also questioned the legitimacy of some of the values underpinning the school’s demand to ‘aim higher’:

Kara: I think they would just and tell me to go on to a different course and always fall back on hairdressing.

Interviewer: What sort of things would they suggest?

Kara: I don’t know, probably something with better money. That’s what people think about these days.

Rejecting high financial reward as a legitimate motivation for pursuing an occupational aim, Kara’s statements can be read as resisting the demand to pursue ‘success’ by prioritising a different set of values than that suggested in the dominant discourse. This resonates with other research which found a tendency among working-class young people to prioritise happiness over maximising income through pursuing prestigious careers (see Archer et al., 2010; Brown, 2011; Watts & Bridges, 2006). However, rather than simply expressing ‘habituated aspirations’ (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2013), the pupils in this study contested dominant notions of ‘success’ in various forms. Although not amounting to a coherent counter-narrative, the pupils’ contestations suggest agency and point towards spaces for resistance and counter-discourse.

Becoming ‘smart’?

At a general level, the pupils who participated in the study aligned with meritocratic principles, constructing ‘success’ as a result of individual ability and effort. Contradictions emerged when pupils assessed the respective importance of ability and effort. Most young people made a connection between effort and academic attainment, echoing some of the school’s messages on the importance of attributes such as persistence and motivation:

Everybody can achieve when they put their mind to it.

Because people give up all the time, but if you just tried a bit more, you could be successful instead of just giving up.

The higher attaining pupils tended to attribute the lower academic attainment among some of their peers to a lack of will and motivation:

I think there's only a certain amount a school can implement on you. I mean fair enough you turn up every day. But it's you at the end of the day that has to be successful; it's not the school's responsibility.

(...) there is another end where people probably could achieve, but don't, so knowing you can, but deciding you won't, basically. They could, but they decide not to, can't be bothered working, not motivated.

In these statements, the pupils seemed to mobilise the idea that academic achievement is a matter of a conscious, individual choice. Drawing on his own experience, Robert presented his recent educational success as a result of a change in attitude and behaviour, adopting the school's demand for self-transformation:

See last year, I wasn't very good, I wasn't getting good marks and, but this year I came back, busy, working, I just worked and then got the better marks, so obviously I can do it, so, I changed my mind-set.

For several young people, the meritocratic promise of realising achievement through a combination of effort and innate ability seemed to provide a resource they drew upon. Pauline, for example, emphasised the importance of ability over that of social background:

I think outside people have already got an opinion of [name of the local area]: the deprivation, but no, it's not like that at all (...). I think we're perfectly capable.

She underpinned her point further by drawing on the life story of Ben Carson (see above), which, according to her, showed that:

No matter where you come from, you can still be that successful, which is quite successful. (...), so it sort of shows that you can, when you come like from [local area] or [city], whatever, it shows that you can be whatever you want to be.

In her statements, Pauline seemed to echo the school's message that the pupils in the school had the potential to 'achieve just as much as everybody else [young people in more affluent areas]'. Rejecting the idea that structural barriers could prevent 'success', she seemed to deploy the individualising discourse promoted in policy and in the school as a resource in order to envisage herself as upwardly socially mobile.

Those pupils with lower attributed attainment displayed a more ambivalent stance towards meritocratic principles. Although they acknowledged the importance of attitudes and behaviour, they tended to espouse the idea that academic ability is relatively 'fixed', for example, by drawing distinctions between the 'smart' pupils in the school and themselves. As shown in relation to pupils' contestation of 'success', this did not mean that all lower achieving pupils perceived themselves as deficient in terms of ability more generally. Different notions of meritocracy seemed to be mobilised by the pupils: the dominant notion of success on the basis of (activated) innate potential as expressed in academic achievement and a notion of success achieved by proving oneself through putting (practical) abilities to use. The latter

offered some of the pupils the possibility to reject the deficit notion attached with lower academic attainment, while the former meant accepting a position of inferiority in relation to the higher achieving pupils.

Most of the lower attaining pupils regarded the destinations promoted as ‘successful’ by the school as the preserve of ‘smart’ people, which was evident in reactions to the board displaying ‘successful’ former pupils:

Pupil: My cousin, [name] is on that [the board]! She got a job, she works in a bank, she’s smart, so she is!

Pupil: My big cousin, he’s like in a big university, he’s like a really, I mean he wants to be a psychologist, so he’s really smart.

The pupils’ tendency to reject the possibility of pursuing these destinations themselves with reference to a lack of intelligence highlights the tension between the promise of success for everyone and the reality of ‘failure’. In several instances, they indicated that they felt their effort was not recognised by the teachers, as illustrated in this discussion:

Pupil 1: My friend, she wants to be a lawyer, (...) and [name of the teacher] said: we’re being realistic for you, we don’t expect you to be a lawyer when you leave.

Pupil 2: So that [shows] not everybody can do it.

Pupil 1: If somebody says that to you, you just feel rotten.

Pupil 3: Like, there’s no point in trying, if people don’t think ...

The exchange indicates that the pupils had a partial insight into a tension between the meritocratic promise that ‘everything is possible’ and the finite good of ‘success’. In other instances, this tension was expressed through putting the blame either on their personal individual ‘deficit’ of ability or behaviour or on teachers. The pupils’ discourse thus to some extent echoes the dominant tendency to individualise responsibility for ‘success’ and failure and misrecognises the social construction of ability and ‘success’ (Radnor, Koshy, & Taylor, 2007).

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the various ways in which messages of aspiration were conveyed to and negotiated by young people in a school context. Analysing the underlying tenets of ‘aspiration’ messages, and contrasting these with the pupils’ negotiations, has provided an insight into a number of contradictions inherent in the ‘aspiration’ discourse and its ambivalent discursive effects ‘in situ’. Assuming that people are never fully ‘captured’ by the discourse (Trowler, 2001), the analysis opens up the view for the various possibilities to think ‘otherwise’ (Foucault, 1985). In the following, some practical implications of the analysis presented in this paper will be highlighted. It is suggested that schools could work with, rather than smooth over, some of the contradictions that have been exposed.

The finding that the dominant notion of ‘success’ presented in the school revolved around conspicuous middle-class occupations and lifestyles resonates with other research which identified disparities between dominant versions of success and young

people's desired futures (see, for example, Brown, 2011; Watts & Bridges, 2006). However, the analysis presented in this paper also highlighted potential ambivalent 'effects': the young people interviewed in this research often simultaneously recognised 'successful' destinations as desirable – either generally or for themselves – and contested or questioned inherent hierarchies of value and the exclusion of other forms of 'success'.

The tendency of some pupils to present themselves as 'successful' in ways not recognised in the school discourse points to the possibility for the school not only to present a wider range of imaginable 'destinations', but to acknowledge young people's everyday experiences, values and resources. Drawing on local 'funds of knowledge', as recently suggested by Zipin, Sellar and Hattam (2012), could provide schools with a conceptual and practical approach to initiate a shift in discourse away from emphasising the need to 'correct' young people's 'deficits' and towards harnessing the socio-cultural richness of their life worlds.

While there was an indication that the school recognised civic engagement as a form of 'success', 'success' remained tied to credentials and 'good' employment, and thus silenced other 'beings and doings' (Watts & Bridges, 2006), as well as values underpinning the pupils' notions of a good life. A wider discussion with pupils about what it means to live a 'good life' might avoid a narrowing of imaginable futures to professional occupations and higher education, which, as shown in this paper, can have both enabling and alienating effects on pupils.

The insight the pupils had into hierarchies of occupational and educational destinations and a tendency to present 'success' as distant, suggests the need for more critical examination of societal hierarchies of value and reward. Rather than simply calling on young people to aim for a 'better' life', a critical form of careers advice could encompass learning about the structure of the contemporary economy and put into question the idea of poverty as an individual failure that haunts the discourses of aspiration and upward social mobility (Jones & Vagle, 2013). This seems particularly important considering the perceived risk of 'ending up' in low-paid service sector employment expressed by the young people in this study. Opportunities to learn about the history of de-industrialisation of the local area could enable young people to understand the connection between socio-economic realities and their own lives and might provide a starting point for discussions with young people about possibilities to write their own life stories.

These discussions should also address the extent to which the meritocratic promise can be fulfilled. While the discursive practices identified in this paper deployed commonplace logics of 'success' as an outcome of talent/ability and effort, the role of attitudes was emphasised and found expression in a call on pupils to transform their dispositions and behaviours. It was noted that the notion of 'potential' allowed teachers to both 'allocate' suitable destinations (of different types) to the pupils and call on pupils to 'aim higher'. Drawing on the notion of variable individual 'potential' also seemed to be used as a strategy to reconcile the tension between advertising success for all and the implicit realisation that this implies failure for some. This finding suggests the need for further research on the ways in which the nexus between 'ability', 'attainment', and 'aspiration' is understood in schools.

The analysis showed that the pupils at least tacitly grasped the impossibility of 'success' for all by pointing out the limitations of effort and self-transformation. Adopting a more critical sociological approach to understanding 'aspiration', schools could further unpick how 'success' is (re)produced and provide pupils with the tools to assess more realistically what 'capitals' are crucial in today's world. This would

also entail embracing a wider notion of ‘ability’ and questioning what counts as ability in the education system among educators themselves. Working for social justice in and through education warrants a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of social inequalities and grappling with discourses of various prominence.

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Notes

- 1 In 2010, the Minister for Universities and Skills, David Willetts, announced that the funding for AimHigher would cease in 2011. Efforts of ‘raising aspirations’ would continue through access agreements and a national scholarship programme (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010). Similarly, the Coalition government did not renew funding for the Inspiring Communities and expressed the hope that the projects would be continued through ‘local partners’ (Communities and Local Government, 2011).
- 2 Several commentators have pointed out that over the course of his life, Foucault’s focus shifted from a concern with historical constellations of knowledge to disciplinary practices and finally to the ways in which individuals govern themselves (see Downing, 2008; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Mills, 2004); this turn to the subject can be seen as a reaction to the criticism a neglecting individual agency and resistance (Fraser, 1989; Hoy, 1986; McNay, 1994).
- 3 This might reflect public assumptions that young people adopt celebrities as inadequate role models (see Allen & Mendick, 2013).
- 4 S2 stands for the second year in Scottish secondary schools.
- 5 Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.
- 6 Scottish school leaving qualification. Entry to higher education requires completion of several ‘Highers’.

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